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STATE FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/MAG, AND NEA/PI
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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Election of Barack Obama

11. Summary: Reflecting broad Moroccan interest in the U.S. presidential elections, the Moroccan press has been filled with reporting and commentary on the election of Barack Obama as America's 44th president. Commentators variously aver that Obama's leadership will be to Morocco's benefit, detriment, or that relatively little will change. The majority have expressed excitement over the prospects of an Obama presidency, exemplified by the weekly newspaper "La Verite," which wrote on 11/6: "For the United States, as for the world, the opening of a new door was necessary for this ravaged area [i.e. the Arab world]. ...This election [lifts] our spirits and creates a favorable starting point." A handful suggested that this excitement may be misplaced, since Obama will serve American interests foremost. Four overarching themes have emerged: 1) Obama's election will improve the U.S. image abroad (and indeed this was one reason Americans voted for him); 2) the upcoming Democratic administration may be less sympathetic to the Moroccan position on Western Sahara than the current administration; 3) the first election of an African-American President will positively impact the aspirations of minorities throughout the world; and 4) the lack of Moroccan participation in politics is not a reflection of disillusion with politics in general, but rather of Moroccan politics in particular. End summary.

Obama Will Restore U.S. Image

12. The first theme - that Americans elected Barack Obama to improve the United States' image abroad - surfaced in the numerous celebratory and complimentary pieces portraying Obama's election as positive for America and the world. Commentators reflected on the President-elect's foreign policy promises to replace the Bush administration's "unilateralism" and "imperialism" with a more internationalist approach. Many hoped and predicted that America's restored international standing would improve U.S. relations with Arab countries specifically.

Change for the Worse on Western Sahara?

13. At the same time, the Moroccan press evinced concern that the incoming Democratic administration would reevaluate the U.S. stance on Western Sahara and take a position less favorable to Morocco's. Some journalists wrote that Moroccan citizens were generally excited about the incoming Obama administration, while the Moroccan Government was wary. This stems from a general Moroccan impression, reflected in the press coverage, that Republican administrations are more "pro-Moroccan."

Implications for Minorities

14. The election of the first African-American president was

overwhelmingly touted as a major achievement and inspiration to minorities world-wide. Moroccan press coverage contrasted this result and the prominent role minorities play in American politics with the general lack of minority representation in European (especially French) elected politics. Some commentary observed that Obama visited churches and synagogues but not mosques during his campaign, taking this as evidence that Muslim religious minorities could not expect to garner comparable respect.

Interest in Politics . . .
Just not Moroccan Politics

¶5. Some commentators explored the phenomenon that Moroccans appeared far more interested in the U.S. elections than their own. Their conclusion was that Moroccans were not apolitical or apathetic; they followed the American elections closely because they felt that the results would have a direct impact on their lives. Moroccans' own votes, on the other hand, were perceived as having little pragmatic value or potential to affect political change because real power resided with non-elected figures, and because political parties were perceived to be corrupt and unresponsive to their constituencies.

Selected Block Quotes

¶6. "The Second American Revolution," editorial in pro-palace French-language daily "Le Matin," 12/3:

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"Wherever outgoing President Bush failed and lacked acumen, Barack intends to make out of it a challenge to take up, even a question of credibility. The composition of the new team provides both the tone and the measure of the new stakes: restore the image of America, undermined by apocalyptic management for eight years now. Curious coincidence, it seems, that at the moment when the President-elect was nominating his government, George W. Bush believed it necessary to make his pathetic 'mea culpa' [on the faulty American intelligence about WMD in Iraq]... Without a doubt, the arrival of Barack Obama's team will soothe an America that has been constantly depressed under a cataclysmic presidency, and will reconcile the American people with their political leaders and the rest of humanity. In other words, we will witness a second revolution of the U.S., after the election of a man of mixed race to the White House."

¶7. "Americans have chosen Obama to mend fences with the world," in independent Arabic-language daily "Al Ahdath Al Maghrebiya," 11/24:

"The world has received with great joy the news of the victory of Democratic candidate Barack Obama in the U.S. Presidential elections. By voting for the black candidate, Americans wanted the U.S. to mend fences with other peoples and get rid of George Bush's legacy...What interests Americans today is not to have a white or a black President, a Native American, or an Asian, but rather a new, appropriate president to pursue a new policy more beneficial to America, so that America can be strong in today's world with good relations with the different peoples of the world."

¶8. "With morning coffee," daily commentary in independent Arabic-language daily Al Massae, 11/17:

"Moroccans followed the latest American elections more than their own legislative and communal elections... Why? First, they know that elections in America and the nature of the candidate who wins will have an impact on many issues [that they care about], such as the war in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and also the nature of the position the new U.S. Administration takes regarding Arab regimes, democratic issues, human rights and the assistance that will be offered to these countries. Second, Moroccans followed with great interest the arrival of Barack Obama to the White House because he is close 'psychologically' to their

feelings, due to his African origins, the fact that his father was a Muslim, and that he, himself, had studied in a Quranic school in Indonesia. But also Moroccans' hate of Bush, as is the case in many other countries, have caused them to look forward to a change in the world's most powerful country... Third, Moroccans have been interested in U.S. elections because they lack democratic, competitive and genuine elections in their country."

¶9. "The American lesson," in independent French-language daily "Le Soir," 11/17:

"Who said that Moroccans were apolitical? Certainly they did massively boycott the ballot boxes on September 7 [i.e. the last Moroccan elections], and if nothing is done, the same scenario risks being reproduced in 2009 or 2012. But they are still the same people that were impassioned by the American presidential elections, and they are still the same, each in his own way, who supported Barack Obama. Even if there is no need to compare the incomparable, let's dare offer some hypotheses. First of all, Moroccans clearly understood the stakes of the elections: to [elect] one man to head the first superpower of the world. Not all them understood the (complicated) system of American voting, but the ends were obvious to everybody. In our country, we never know (with exactitude) what an election will bring us. Is the party that comes in first sure to govern? Nothing is less certain. And even if this happens, everybody or almost everyone is convinced that the power, the true one, is in the hands of the King. Many prefer to [abstain] as long as their vote has practically no political value. ... There is finally the capacity of the candidate to fulfill his electoral promises. Obama promised a clean break, McCain a soft transition. In patiently [waiting] for more than five hours in front of the voting bureaus, each American knew that the new host of the White House would, constitutionally at least, have the possibility to implement his program."

Riley